

Approach and Eligibility Criteria for the Nottinghamshire Household Support Fund

1) Background

£421 million has been made available to County Councils and Unitary Authorities in England to support those most in need this winter. The funding covers the period 06 October 2021 to 31 March 2022 inclusive. Local Authorities have discretion on how this funding is used.

Nottinghamshire has been allocated **£5.6 million** to support households who would otherwise struggle to buy food, pay essential utility bills, or meet other essential living costs. **At least 50% of the funding is ringfenced and must be applied to vulnerable households with children** (under 19 years), whilst the remainder (**maximum 50%**) is available for **vulnerable households without children** (including individuals).

As with previous similar schemes, it is intended to **provide vouchers for food for 27,500 children and young people eligible for free school meals during the 5 weeks of school holidays** in the funding period. These vouchers have already been provided for the autumn half term and will be issued for the Christmas holidays and February half-term, utilising **£2.3m (41%)** of the funding.

2) Partnership Approach

At its meeting on the 27th October, the Household Support Fund Steering Group agreed the high-level design principles for the Nottinghamshire scheme for the **remaining £3.3m**:

- **One scheme** to cover all areas of Nottinghamshire.
- The scheme will **only be promoted to local organisations and services**, rather than residents.
- **Professional frontline officers** working for the **County, Borough and District Councils** (plus other relevant organisations) will use their knowledge and understanding of need to identify and **assess the needs** of relevant residents, **check eligibility**, and **make a request** for financial support on the resident's behalf.
- The **County Council will receive and process applications** to the scheme to ensure consistency, improve anti-fraud measures, and provide monitoring information to the Government.
- **Vouchers will be used** as far as possible to provide the needed support to residents.
- The primary focus of the local eligibility criteria developed will be **support for food, energy & water, and essentials linked to energy and water** (with regards to white goods only in exceptional circumstances).
- Local criteria **will not prioritise support for wider essentials or housing costs**. A process would be designed to include the use of a panel of partnership professionals to consider any applications made in **exceptional circumstances** under these two headings or for white goods (under the essentials linked to energy and water category).

- In common with previous schemes, the Council would seek to use **Huggg Vouchers** and the **Nottingham Energy Partnership** as key facilitators of the scheme.
- Funding will be awarded on a **first-come, first-served** basis.

3) Aim of the Nottinghamshire Scheme

The Nottinghamshire funding will be used to provide support to those in **immediate need**. Although the government funding can be applied to wider categories of expenditure, the Nottinghamshire **scheme will focus support primarily to food, energy & water bills, and essentials linked to energy & water bills**.

In **exceptional cases** only, it can also be used to support with white goods, wider essentials, and support housing costs.

Sub-Appendix A gives the full Government guidance on those different categories of eligible expenditure.

4) Households eligible for the Nottinghamshire Scheme

Eligible households are those that are in **immediate need** and **fit in one of the following categories**:

- Parents/guardians with one or more children in the household in the following groups:
 - Eligible for benefits-related Free School Meals.
 - Not eligible for benefits-related Free School Meals, but where the parent/guardian is receiving one of the following:
 - Council Tax Reduction
 - Housing Benefit
 - Universal Credit that includes housing costs in the calculation
 - Income Support
 - Income based Job Seekers Allowance
 - Income based Employment Support Allowance
 - Working Tax Credits
 - Pension Credit (Guarantee Credit)
- Single people and couples without children who are receiving one of the following:
 - Council Tax Reduction
 - Housing Benefit
 - Universal Credit that includes housing costs in the calculation
 - Income Support
 - Income based Job Seekers Allowance
 - Income based Employment Support Allowance
 - Working Tax Credits
 - Pension Credit (Guarantee Credit)
- Care leavers up to the age of 25.
- Young people with an Education Healthcare Plan aged 19-24 who are eligible for Free School Meals.
- 2-year old's accessing a funded childcare place.

- 3-and 4-year old's accessing Early Years Pupil Premium.
- Families, couples, or single adults in any of the following groups:
 - Known to domestic abuse services.
 - No recourse to public funds.
 - Experiencing considerable in-work poverty.
 - Assessed by a professional as in urgent need for food, energy & water support, or in **exceptional** cases support with housing and white goods. (Following a panel decision – see later).

NOTES:

Households must meet at least one of the eligibility criteria above.

Children eligible for Free School Meals will already have had food provided both during term time and school holidays – therefore applications for food for those children entitled to free school meals should not ordinarily be approved.

5) Households not eligible for support

Those ineligible for consideration for the Nottinghamshire scheme are:

- Those who **live outside of the Nottinghamshire County Council borders** who will need to approach their own Local Authority; and
- **Members of the public who have referred themselves** directly.

6) How will the need for support be identified and assessed?

Local professionals working for the County, Borough and District Councils will play two essential roles in ensuring that all the funding is delivered within pressing timescales in a fair way to those in most need across the County.

- **Identifying Need** - Firstly, they will be the 'eyes and ears' of the partnership, using their local frontline knowledge and understanding of local communities to **identify those households in immediate need** of support.
- **Assessors** - Secondly, those nominated professionals will be responsible for **undertaking an assessment** to ensure
 - a) the **household's eligibility** to support as set out in section 4, and
 - b) to **assess the level of need and support** that should be provided.

Those nominated professional assessors would then make a request for the financial support to the appropriate support provider **certifying the legitimacy** of the request.

As part of a phased approach to rollout of the Fund (section 9), other trusted agencies will be onboarded to undertake the assessments to increase the assessment capacity across the partnership.

Requests made by the assessors will need to be made either to the County Council or subject to ongoing work (another nominated partner), depending on type of support needed:

- **Food, Essential Costs related to Energy and Water**, (and in exceptional cases see section 8, white goods, wider essential needs, and housing costs).
- **Energy and Water** – initially via the online form to Nottinghamshire County Council. If a system can be established, then direct to a partner, details to be confirmed.

Referrers – there are many other organisations in the County that will identify households in need that would meet the eligibility criteria for the scheme. As part of the communications developed to promote the scheme, we will target those organisations and ask them to refer those types of cases for assessment to the local relevant District or Borough Council, or the County Council, dependant on the circumstances.

Reasonable administrative costs – one eligible category of expenditure for the partnership is for reasonable administrative costs. The County Council is happy to discuss with partners involved in delivering the scheme recovery of reasonable costs incurred, for example in using some of the funding to either recruit resource to assess or to backfill for those undertaking assessments.

7) Value of Vouchers

Initially, eligible households can receive a **maximum of four vouchers per household** over the different categories of support up until the 31st of March 2022, one voucher for food, two for energy, and one for water.

The value of the individual vouchers available are set out below.

Food	A household with one person	£30
	A household with two people	£60
	A household with three or more people	£90
Energy	A max of 2 vouchers for energy for £50 each per household	£50
Water	The value of the voucher for water will be £80 per household	£80

8) Exceptional Circumstances

The partnership has decided to focus the local scheme primarily on providing support with food, energy & water, and essentials linked to energy and water (not including white goods).

It is however recognised that households may face other hardships and require support that helps with:

- **White goods** – ‘Essentials linked to energy and water’ guidance does allow funding to be used to provide support with essentials including purchase of equipment such as fridges, freezers, ovens, etc.
- **Wider essential needs** - This may include support with a range of other bills deemed to be essential. The Nottinghamshire scheme will only be used to support with wider essential needs (those not linked to energy and water) to support with other bills including broadband or phone bills, clothing, and essential transport-related costs such as repairing a car, buying a bicycle, or paying for fuel.
- **Housing Costs** - In exceptional cases of genuine emergency where existing housing support schemes do not meet this exceptional need, the fund can be used to support housing costs.

To build in flexibility to the Nottinghamshire scheme, professionals who are assessors will be able to request support that fit in these categories as they deem necessary based on facts of the case and on an exceptional basis.

Exceptional Case Panel - Due to the more complex nature of these types of support request, a panel comprised of three professionals from the partner organisations will consider all exceptional applications and make the final decision as to a) whether to support the application, and if so, b) the level of that support.

Employees of Assessor Organisations - Further, if applications are made to the scheme on behalf of any employees of the partners involved, the panel would also be used to ensure fair and impartial consideration is given to those applications.

Panel Schedule and Appeals – panels will be scheduled to take place once a week on a Monday. Any appeals against the decision of the panels will go to an Appeal Body comprised of three managers at Nottinghamshire County Council for final decision.

9) Phased Approach to Rollout

Due to the approach agreed, the pressing timescales to apply funding, and the set-up work to recruit staff and procure different elements of the support, there will be a phased launch of the scheme. A soft launch strategy will be employed with no direct communications being made to the public to promote the scheme. **Sub-Appendix B** sets out the phases of the launch.

SUB-APPENDIX A – ELIGIBLE SPEND OF THE FUND – GOVERNMENT GUIDANCE

Food

The Fund should primarily be used to provide support with food whether in kind or through vouchers or cash.

Energy and water

The Fund should also primarily be used to support with energy bills for any form of fuel that is used for the purpose of domestic heating, cooking or lighting, including oil or portable gas cylinders. It can also be used to support with water bills including for drinking, washing, cooking, and sanitary purposes and sewerage.

Essentials linked to energy and water.

The Fund can be used to provide support with essentials linked to energy and water (including sanitary products, warm clothing, soap, blankets, boiler service/repair, purchase of equipment including fridges, freezers, ovens, etc.), in recognition that a range of costs may arise which directly affect a household's ability to afford or access food, energy and water.

Wider essentials

The Fund can be used to support with wider essential needs not linked to energy and water should Authorities consider this appropriate in their area. These may include, but are not limited to, support with other bills including broadband or phone bills, clothing, and essential transport-related costs such as repairing a car, buying a bicycle, or paying for fuel. This list is not exhaustive.

Housing Costs

In exceptional cases of genuine emergency where existing housing support schemes do not meet this exceptional need, the Fund can be used to support housing costs. Where eligible, ongoing housing support for rent must be provided through the housing cost element of Universal Credit (UC) and Housing Benefit (HB) rather than the Household Support Fund.

In addition, eligibility for Discretionary Housing Payments (DHPs) must first be considered before emergency housing support is offered through the Household Support Fund. The Authority must also first consider whether the claimant is at statutory risk of homelessness and therefore owed a duty of support through the Homelessness Prevention Grant (HPG).

- In exceptional cases of genuine emergency, households in receipt of HB, UC, or DHPs can still receive housing cost support through the Household Support Fund if it is deemed necessary by their Authority. However, the Fund should not be used to provide housing support on an ongoing basis or to support unsustainable tenancies.
- Individuals in receipt of some other form of housing support could still qualify for the other elements of the Household Support Fund, such as food, energy, water, essentials linked to energy and water and wider essentials.

- The Fund cannot be used to provide mortgage support, though homeowners could still qualify for the other elements of the Fund (such as food, energy, water, essentials linked to energy and water and wider essentials). Where a homeowner is having difficulty with their mortgage payments, they should contact their lender as soon as possible to discuss their circumstances as lenders will have a set procedure to assist.
- The Fund can exceptionally and in genuine emergency be used to provide support for historic rent arrears built up prior to an existing benefit claim for households already in receipt of Universal Credit and Housing Benefit. This is because these arrears are excluded from the criteria for Discretionary Housing Payments. However, support with rent arrears is not the primary intent of the fund and should not be the focus of spend.

Reasonable administrative costs

This includes reasonable costs incurred administering the scheme. These include for example:

- staff costs
- advertising and publicity to raise awareness of the scheme
- web page design
- printing application forms
- small IT changes, for example, to facilitate MI production

Eligible spend does not include

- Advice services such as debt advice.
- Mortgage costs.

SUB-APPENDIX B – PHASED LAUNCH OF THE HOUSEHOLD SUPPORT FUND

Phase 1: 15 November 2021

Household Support Fund officially launched to distribute food vouchers and support in exceptional circumstances*

Submissions that have been assessed accepted directly from internal NCC, District and Borough Councils at this time

Phase 2: 22 November 2021

Household Support Fund will accept requests for energy support for those who use Paypoint Top up cards

Submissions that have been assessed accepted directly from internal NCC, District and Borough Councils at this time

Phase 3: 29 November 2021

Energy support to be launched to provide funding for those not using Paypoint Top up card

Wider support advice on energy issues to be offered including wrap around support

Submissions that have been assessed accepted directly from internal NCC, District and Borough Councils at this time

Phase 4: 6 December 2021 (at the latest)

Wider launch to other partner organisations such as Job Centre Plus and Citizens Advice Bureau on all aspects of the scheme

These additional parties will be able to submit those who have been assessed by them directly

Phase 5: 13 December 2021

Free School Meal vouchers for Christmas break to be distributed by Nottinghamshire County Council

21 January 2021

Interim DWP MI Return

Phase 6: February 2021

Free School Meal vouchers for half term to be distributed by Nottinghamshire County Council

22 April 2021

Final DWP MI Return

*Exceptional cases are defined as support with white goods, wider essentials, and support housing costs.